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ABSTRACT

This article highlights the work of Ontario teachers who use research and inquiry in the classrooms as part of self-directed professional learning. It positions action research within the work of the Professional Affairs Department at the Ontario College of Teachers. It begins with a narrative account of the researcher's work as a program officer at the Ontario College of Teachers, then goes on to describe findings from research on action research and standards of practice. The paper discusses the development of standards of practice for the teaching profession. It includes an example of the Standard for Ongoing Professional Learning to demonstrate the descriptive nature of the standards. Data from focus groups with teachers involved in action research and from writing teams of teachers highlighted how action research supported specific aspects of teacher development. Respondents perceived action research as a powerful tool for working with specific themes in their practice and for personalizing standards of practice for the profession. The paper concludes by discussing the importance of recognizing action research as professional learning. (Contains 17 references.) (SM)

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Ontario College of Teachers: Action Research & Standards of Practice for the Teaching Profession: Making Connections

Frances Squire

Paper prepared for the
Ontario Action Researcher

Spring, 1999

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Action Research & Standards of Practice for the Teaching Profession: Making Connections

prepared for the Ontario Action Researcher, Spring, 1999

Fran Squire, Program Officer

Professional Affairs Department
Ontario College of Teachers

INTRODUCTION

Brantford, Goderich, Waterloo, Kingston, North Bay and Peel ..... just some of the places where action research is thriving in Ontario! Despite the troubling times that frame our work as educators, there are teachers, principals and superintendents who are passionate about the research and inquiry they are conducting in their classrooms and schools. As part of my role as a program officer at the Ontario College of Teachers I have had the opportunity to meet and work with many of these teachers who have chosen this form of self directed professional learning. In this article I highlight the work of these practitioners and position action research within the work of the Professional Affairs Department at the College. I begin with a narrative account of my work at the College and go on to describe the findings from our "research on action research" and standards of practice. I conclude by asking some questions about the acknowledgement and accreditation of teacher research.

THE RELUCTANT BUREAUCRAT

Picture this 50 something teacher, Dr. Squire, in her first full time office job. No longer in the academic world, no longer in the world of schools, not even associated with the ministry, she struggled to retain her teacher perspectives in the unfamiliar world of bureaucracy. To some of her peers her new job did not count as real. Positioned firmly in her 10 x 10 work station, surrounded by demanding technology, she nonetheless celebrated the acquisition of her own phone, something unattainable in 33 years of teaching. From her vantage point on this new landscape she watched and listened to what was happening in the world of education, but this time she did not

automatically accept or become what she saw. Questions surfaced at every turn. She was concerned about the mixed reviews the College was getting from the field. How could she share with her peers her beliefs about the positive new directions of the College? The task of writing the standards of practice seemed so overwhelming that she concentrated on the part of her job she knew best, teachers, research and schools.

She was responsible for establishing connections between ongoing professional learning and the standards of practice for the teaching profession. Focusing on one example of this type of learning she explored the field of "action research" in Ontario, working with exemplary teachers who were engaged in this form of research based professionalism. She watched and learned and began to absorb the passion and enthusiasm these educators were feeling about their work in schools. She saw that the teacher researcher movement based on teaching as a form of inquiry was challenging the traditional ideas of teacher development as fixing up "deficit teachers". Teachers were saying things like:

- *This kind of learning celebrates the professional teachers knowledge.*
- *This kind of ongoing learning allows me to construct my own meanings.*
- *I don't have to rely on outside experts.*
- *The most effective body of knowledge about the teaching profession lies within the teachers themselves.*

The teachers with whom she worked were making connections to the standards of practice by studying and inquiring into their own practice, taking ownership for that practice and creating their own professional learning agendas. They were also concerned about how their work would be recognized, acknowledged and valued. How would it count?
And she was asking,
How do we keep the spontaneity and individualism inherent in initiatives like action research as we establish criteria for their recognition in the educational community?
How can we keep the teacher's voice as we frame policy for professional learning?

Developing the Standards of Practice for the Teaching Profession

It was indeed questions like these about the context of professional learning that prompted me to leave my teaching role last year and join the staff of the Professional Affairs Department at the Ontario College of Teachers. Beginning to work in a unit called Standards of Practice and Education, my first task was to figure out why we were engaged in writing standards. The first reason was to meet the College mandate to establish standards of practice for the profession and provide for the

ongoing education of its members. What were standards of practice for the profession? We first explored the concept of a self regulatory organization. A self-regulatory body must be able to articulate what it is that makes that body unique. In our case it means answering the questions "What makes being a teacher a unique professional experience?" Why can't any other caring adult who has a university degree be designated "a teacher"? Professional self-regulatory bodies most often use the term "standard of practice" to refer to the descriptors which answer these kinds of questions. The standards of practice, developed over the last year with substantial input from educators and the public, are organized within five themes: commitment to students and student learning, professional knowledge, teaching practice, leadership and community, and ongoing professional learning.

The standards of practice for the teaching profession were developed using a variety of sources and resources. Existing statements from other educational jurisdictions were reviewed. This review included both national and international examples. Standards of practice statements from other self-regulatory bodies in Ontario were also examined. Hundreds of members of the College and the public contributed through structured research activities to the development of the standards of practice. The structured research activities included interviews, focus groups, and written responses to questions posed on the College web site and in College publications. In addition, many participants offered feedback through e-mail, discussion groups, writing teams and written correspondence. Based on our research the Standards of Practice for the Teaching Profession reflect the thinking and indeed the words of many educators across Ontario. I include here an example of the Standard for Ongoing Professional Learning, which will demonstrate the descriptive nature of the standards:

ONGOING PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

Teachers are learners who acknowledge the interdependence of teacher learning and student learning. Teachers engage in a continuum of professional growth to improve their practice.

1. **Teacher learning and student learning**

Teachers:

(a) understand that teacher learning is directly related to student learning;

(b) act as role models who demonstrate lifelong learning; and

(c) engage in a variety of learning opportunities both individual and collaborative that are integrated into practice for the benefit of student learning.

2. **Professional growth**

Teachers:

(a) recognize that continuous professional growth is an integral part of teaching;

(b) recognize that teaching and professional growth are influenced by personal, social and educational contexts;

(c) understand that teaching practice is enhanced by many forms of knowledge, ways of knowing and ways to access that knowledge; and

(d) anticipate and plan the kinds of learning they will need to respond to a variety of educational contexts.

3. **Improving practice**

Teachers:

(a) demonstrate a commitment to continued professional growth;

(b) know that professional learning is most effective when it is job-embedded, relevant and supported by others within the educational community;

(c) reflect on their practice and learn from experience;

(d) draw on and contribute, where appropriate, to various forms of educational research to improve their practice; and

(e) collaborate with colleagues to enhance student learning

ACTION RESEARCH AND STANDARDS OF PRACTICE

The Ongoing Professional Learning subcommittee was asked to focus its part of the inquiry on a sample of teacher researchers, to explore how action research related to the themes emerging from our review of standards documents. By doing so we also hoped to find out more about standards as they might apply to action research. My particular task was to first investigate what was happening in action research in Ontario and then work with several of those groups to help collect data for writing the standards. Action research was chosen as a significant example of a teacher-directed, school-based, professional learning that focuses on and validates everyday practice.

When I began the task of investigating action research I knew little about it in a formal sense but as I learned more I realized, like many colleagues, that I had indeed been involved informally in action research for many years. I just hadn't called it that. As I explored the literature on action research and connected with educators engaged in action research across the province, I found a variety of approaches and definitions. (McNiff, 1988, 1998; Sagor, 1992; Whitehead, 1993; Calhoun, 1994; Russell, 1995; Delong, 1995, 1998; Hannay,1998). Often called reflective practice, teacher research or school-based collaborative research, action research is conducted by practitioners who want to do something to improve their own practice. One commonly held understanding seems to be that action research describes professionals studying or reflecting on their own practice in order to improve it. Action research is a process of inquiry rather than a program and its principles can be applied anywhere within the educational community. In Ontario, action research is being implemented by individuals and groups of educators at the pre-service and in-service levels, within graduate school programs and within collaborative school-based initiatives at both the elementary and secondary panels. Positioned within the broader field of teacher development research, action research is seen as a viable way for teachers to research and explore their own work instead of looking to "outside experts" for theoretical answers. Respecting the professionalism of teachers by validating their experience and practical knowledge, action research also allows teachers to model the kinds of learning experiences they encourage for students.

Action research offers teachers and teacher educators an opportunity for individual professional growth through ongoing dialogues with people and texts and an equally important opportunity to create a learning community within a school.

METHODOLOGY

Although there has been considerable attention in current educational literature to issues of theory and practice in action research, (Hollingsworth & Sockett, 1994; Cochrane-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Burnaford, Fischer & Hobson, 1996; Delong & Wideman, 1998) little has been written on the relationship of action research to the standards of practice for the profession. I wanted to see if action research as a self-directed form of professional learning could assist educators in reaching individual goals based on the standards the College was developing. I knew that I could draw upon the many contacts with action researchers throughout Ontario that I had established during the first months of my job. My network consisted of pre-service teacher candidates, teachers, faculty, superintendents, principals, ministry representatives and program co-ordinators. Some action researchers were beginning the process, others were third year veterans of this form of ongoing learning. Some had voluntarily chosen action research to pursue questions of classroom practice; others were introduced to action research as a required component of another program. Five groups were selected to accommodate a range of experience, diversity of role and demographics. The two beginning researcher groups were facilitated in a taped, informal discussion group format; the more experienced group contributed in a formal focus group methodology; while two heterogeneous groups participated in a writing team strategy.

I felt it would be useful to get at the connection between action research and the standards of practice in several ways. In one instance focus group methodology was chosen because, as Morgan & Krueger (1998) suggest, "Focus groups are fundamentally a way of listening to people and learning from them" (p. 9). I asked purposeful questions to gain insights into the participant's beliefs and attitudes about ongoing learning and standards of practice. The focus group in Waterloo responded to prepared questions like: How does action research support the idea of commitment to student

learning? How can action research play a role in building a capacity for leadership? The discussion groups in North Bay and Clinton dealt with questions and issues emerging from the group; however in concluding the sessions I asked specific questions about how their action research supported the themes. The writing teams in Brantford and Kingston were directed to select a theme and explore how action research connected with the standards of practice by composing a standards statement, describing a rationale, creating a narrative example or exemplar, predicting outcomes and posing a set of questions for further discussion. The findings from the analysis of the taped conversations and work groups confirmed the strong links between action research and standards.

FINDINGS FROM THE FOCUS GROUP

The focus group educators were all involved in action research at the school or system level. Their responses, often told as stories, focused on how they saw action research supporting each theme. They perceive action research as a powerful strategy to work with the themes in their practice. Presented below is an excerpt from the executive summary of the transcript relating to the theme of "Commitment to Student Learning". The participants saw action research supporting the theme in the following ways:

- *self reflection is the idea of being committed to teaching ALL children*
- *commitment to student learning is fundamental in action research.*
- *action research is very practical...looking directly at students learning*
- *deals with real issues, real students, not just theory*
- *questions are generated through classroom and student learning*
- *action research based on student feedback, reflecting, revising*
- *there is a direct relationship between student learning and action research/ creative, divergent, a personal response to each student*
- *models life long learning through action research*
- *action research makes us test assumptions...reveals surprises*
- *action research invites risk taking, making mistakes...a powerful concept for student learning*

- *action research shifts the old paradigm of teaching to a new one of teacher as learner.*

A common strand emerging from this group was the notion of the school as a learning organization and how action research could play a defining role in that structure. It is important to note that this group was visibly and actively supported in this idea by their superintendent whose enthusiasm was felt in a very tangible way. Although the focus of this session was a discussion of standards themes, participants expressed a passion and commitment for their work and how their teaching had been enhanced through involvement in action research. One elementary vice principal participant put it this way:

There is nothing more powerful for student learning than for a teacher to go in and say "I'm here learning too" and that modeling of learning is continual. I think that's very powerful and different from the old paradigms of teaching when the teacher was not a learner with the student. Action research enhances our commitment to student learning.

FINDINGS FROM THE WRITING TEAMS

The writing teams at Queen's University and the Grande Erie District Board of Education were deliberately focused on the connection between standards and action research. The Queen's University group was composed of students in the pre-service program, experienced teachers taking masters level courses, two beginning principals, and representatives from the Francophone community. In this case the Queen's professor, involved in a self-study of his own teaching practice, acted as a catalyst in moving action research forward. The Grande Erie group was an enthusiastic research community as well, acknowledging the leadership of their actively involved superintendent, who was modeling her own action research project for staff. To share the high level of teacher writing emerging from our work groups I present an example of the draft documents created. The first was written by Lori Barkans, a primary teacher in Grande Erie in collaboration with her superintendent Jackie Delong. They saw action research supporting the growth of a learning community.

Creating a Learning Community

	Action Research creates and supports a collaborative learning community for the purpose of improving student learning. It encourages sharing and dialogue among the members of the learning community. [students, peers, parents]
Rationale	The Action Research process recognizes that everyone has a contribution to make to student learning. By bringing together the knowledge and experience of each member of the community, including students, parents, community members, teachers, support staff and administration, the combined learning is greater than that of the individual. Action Research builds a body of educational knowledge created by practitioners that is essential to the improvement of learning and the growth of the teaching profession. Action Research supports school improvement through research based professionalism. Action Research develops a culture of research based learning through action/reflection cycles. The action research question is developed from the concerns of the individual group based on the areas they see as needing improvement. Action Research demands data collection and analysis and ultimately sharing in order to answer the question *How can I (We) improve student learning*.
Example	Our project is now closing in on its third year. We focussed in on the question – *How can we assist at-risk children to meet the learning outcomes in reading by grade 3?* Our research team consisted of 3 primary teachers with the same concern. We conducted research with the support of our Principal and Superintendent. The team researched and selected a reading program called "All Star" which involved a 'team' approach. Volunteer parents were an integral part of the implementation of the strategy, the reflection upon its impact and success, with success defined as children improving their reading. Change was documented through

	careful records and assessments kept by parents, children and teachers. The initiative has become a part of our regular practice in the primary division
Outcomes	Some of the evidence is the quantitative data collected through pre-test, continuous and post-test. More important, a number of the 'focus' or at-risk children are reading and are able to write and talk about what they've read. The evidence is found in parent and volunteer comments, in classroom teacher reflective journals and observations, and in children's self-evaluation. Our means of sharing our learning include published accounts: *Act, Reflect Revise, Revitalize*, 1996 and *Action Research: School Improvement through Research Based Professionalism*, 1998; newspaper interviews, workshops, video and teleconference. We believe that we've contributed to the body of the educational knowledge of the professional educator. We feel we've grown as professionals, better able to meet the needs of our community and improve the learning of our children. We've firmly established a reflective method of evaluating our teaching practices and implementing change. We're able to offer support to others interested in pursuing change in this manner and improving the learning of our children. We continue to grow and learn along with our children. As a learning community we were able to affect profound change which as individuals we would not have accomplished. We grew in confidence – professionals, volunteers and children – as we all realised we had the skills and knowledge to improve student learning. The experience was enlightening – a realisation of potential.

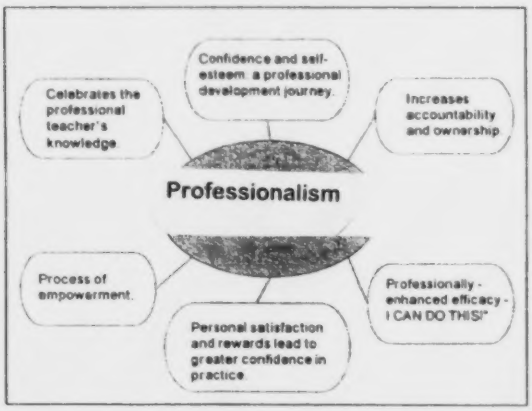
Teachers articulated through their writing and conversations how they saw action research supporting the preliminary themes of the standards of practice and how standards of practice were visible in action research. The results from all the teams helped our understanding of both action research, professional learning and standards of practice.

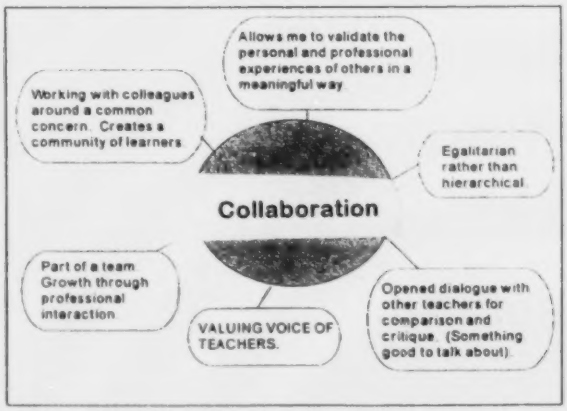
THE BENEFITS OF ACTION RESEARCH

From conversations with the field I have come to understand how action research is, for many teachers, a powerful strategy in this process of personalizing standards of practice for the profession. For example, when the research participants reflected on the benefits of action research, they highlighted the positive sense of control over their own learning, set within educational contexts all too often negative. The following themes emerged from their comments about benefits.

- *an increased sense of professionalism*
- *teacher generated knowledge*
- *reflective practice*
- *collaboration with colleagues*
- *the connection to student learning*
- *knowledge of research skills and*
- *managing the change process,*

(The following graphics, representing the themes visually, were part of the presentation at the 1998 Act, Reflect, Revise Conference)


Confidence and self-esteem: a professional development journey.
Celebrates the professional teacher's knowledge
Increases accountability and ownership
Professionalism
Process of empowerment.
Professionally - enhanced efficacy - I CAN DO THIS!"
Personal satisfaction and rewards lead to greater confidence in practice.


Allows me to validate the personal and professional experiences of others in a meaningful way.
Working with colleagues around a common concern. Creates a community of learners.
Egalitarian rather than hierarchical.
Collaboration
Part of a team. Growth through professional interaction.
VALUING VOICE OF TEACHERS.
Opened dialogue with other teachers for comparison and critique. (Something good to talk about).

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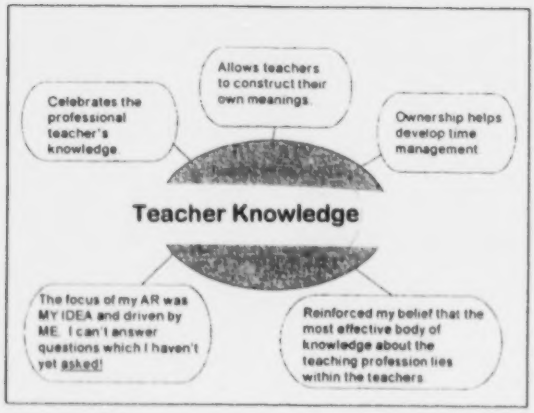
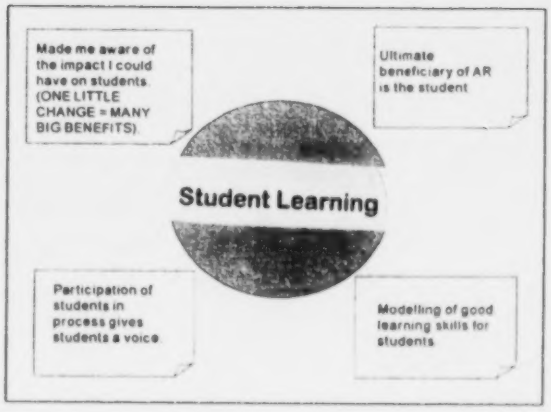
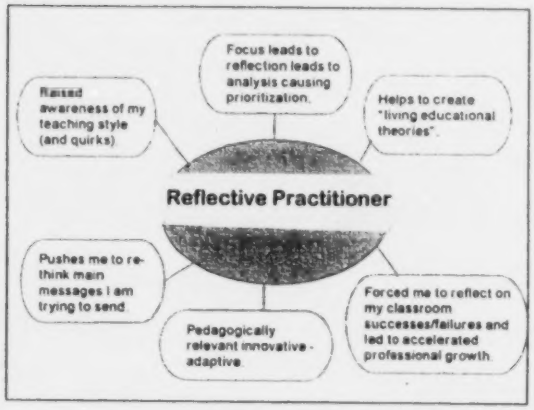
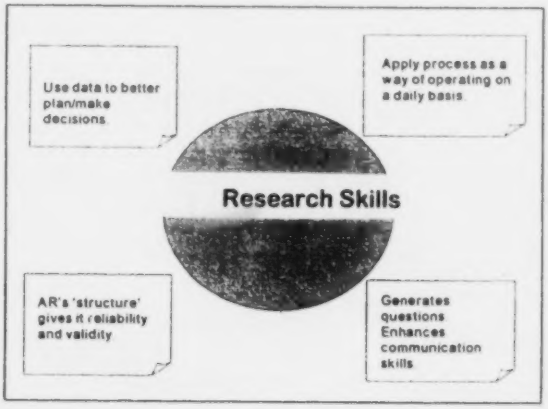
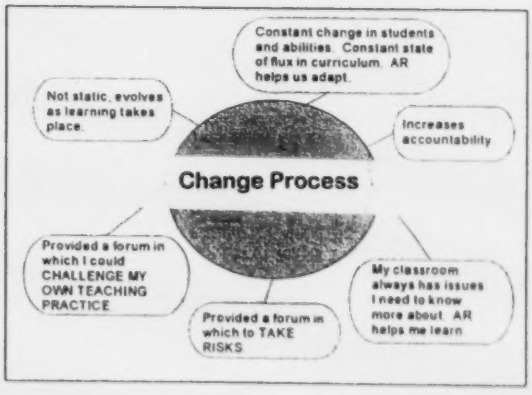

Allows teachers to construct their own meanings.
Celebrates the professional teacher's knowledge.
Ownership helps develop time management.
Teacher Knowledge
The focus of my AR was MY IDEA and driven by ME. I can't answer questions which I haven't yet asked!
Reinforced my belief that the most effective body of knowledge about the teaching profession lies within the teachers.


Made me aware of the impact I could have on students. (ONE LITTLE CHANGE = MANY BIG BENEFITS).
Ultimate beneficiary of AR is the student.
Student Learning
Participation of students in process gives students a voice.
Modelling of good learning skills for students.


Focus leads to reflection leads to analysis causing prioritization.
Raised awareness of my teaching style (and quirks).
Helps to create "living educational theories".
Reflective Practitioner
Pushes me to re-think main messages I am trying to send.
Pedagogically relevant innovative - adaptive.
Forced me to reflect on my classroom successes/failures and led to accelerated professional growth.


Use data to better plan/make decisions.
Apply process as a way of operating on a daily basis.
Research Skills
AR's 'structure' gives it reliability and validity.
Generates questions. Enhances communication skills.


Constant change in students and abilities. Constant state of flux in curriculum. AR helps us adapt.
Not static, evolves as learning takes place.
Increases accountability.
Change Process
Provided a forum in which I could CHALLENGE MY OWN TEACHING PRACTICE.
My classroom always has issues. I need to know more about AR helps me learn.
Provided a forum in which to TAKE RISKS.

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Reflecting back on the standards themes of student learning, professional knowledge, leadership, community and ongoing professional learning, we can see how the same themes emerged from this indirect analysis of the teacher's conversation. Through my "research on action research" I was coming to understand how action research informed the creation of the standards and how the standards in turn, informed action research. Informed by the action researcher's perspectives, I was more confident to take on the responsibility of defining professional learning on paper. Each program officer was involved in similar research activities with different and diverse groups of educators across the province. Based on the analysis of this data, we have now completed the actual writing of the standards of practice, an awesome and challenging task, a task however made easier and more credible by the substantial input from the field. We also produced an "exemplar" of action research for the professional learning framework based on the work of the research groups.

Recognizing Action Research as Professional Learning

With the framework we must come to grips with questions of recognizing, acknowledging and valuing action research within an institutional context. And so we are beginning to think about the next step as we move towards accreditation of professional learning. If action research is a powerful process for reflection and learning that honours teachers professionalism, if action research can be a way to individualize the standards, then how do we encourage its growth as a professional learning strategy? How can it be defined? What criteria should be used for its recognition and who should set the criteria?

An important criteria for a self-regulatory body is the ability of the profession to assume the responsibility for the transmission of the knowledge, skills and values to its members through ongoing professional learning. In Ontario, this means that the Ontario College of Teachers has now assumed the responsibility for the accreditation of pre-service education programs at the Faculties of Education in Ontario Universities. It

also means that the College will accredit in-service professional learning. In-service learning includes Additional Qualifications Courses currently offered through the faculties, the Principal's Qualifications Program and the Supervisory Officer's Qualifications Program. The College may, in future, also accredit other forms of professional learning such as conferences, institutes and workshops. Another challenge will involve identifying ways to recognize and value the crucial ongoing learning that takes place in practice. Action research, mentoring, computer networking with colleagues are examples of this type of ongoing professional learning. How will practitioners be recognized and acknowledged for their work in these forms of personal inquiry?

The teachers in our research groups expressed concerns about action research becoming institutionalized if set criteria were established for possible accreditation by the Ontario College of Teachers. Would action research lose its individual quality if it was "co-opted" by educational managers and policy makers as suggested by Elliot 1989, cited in Cole & Knowles, (1996)? Would action research lose the very essence that has captured the imaginations of so many educators? Offering some alternatives, McNiff (1998), advocates recognition for who we are and what we do. "We need to develop new metaphors -networks of people generating interchanging and testing knowledge and experience and validating each others claims .....what is at issue is what is accredited, how it is judged and who judges."(p. 100).

THE PRACTITIONER'S PERSPECTIVE

The following comments emerging from the discussion groups reflect the complexity of this issue from the practitioner's perspective.

- *Do you really want to do that? Recognize? One thing I like about this is the intrinsic part. You are doing it for yourself. You're motivating yourself. You're not expecting someone else to do it. So I think there is a strength in it. Action research is all about improving and self motivation.*
- *I think recognition might get people doing things just to jump through more hoops.*

- *If we put too many restrictions on AR it will lose its value!*
- *The reward in itself is the process of going through it working with other teachers on professional development.*
- *This is what I can do. This is my job. I'm proud of it but I still can make it better for my students. That's the value of action research.*

On the other side of the issue many teachers wanted formal recognition of some kind, a credit comparable to an Additional Qualifications course or a notation on their teacher's record card.

- *Recognition is needed for AR. I spent the same number of hours as I would have for an academic course. Formal accreditation is needed for our work.*
- *Through documentation teachers can verify the hours they have spent on their own professional development.*
- *We want our action research accredited by the College as an important part of our research.*

Most agreed that sharing the results of action research was a necessary step in the recognition process whether that sharing occurred in a small staff presentation or at an international conference. Publishing, presenting and peer and parent recognition all rated highly as alternative ways that participation in action research could be valued by the educational community.

- *I think it's nice to be able to share…informally... with others in my intermediate division.*
- *Sharing must be voluntary…we can't impose our methods for sharing. Most important of all is that the people doing it, value it.*
- *Sharing should happen on a stage that is comfortable for the individual.*
- *By sharing the research teachers could come to the forefront of developing educational knowledge….who knows better about how classrooms work than teachers?*

IMPLICATIONS

Cole, (1997) argues that reflective practice has garnered little institutional support as an accepted form of professional learning. Trying to give that support, the college is faced with the dilemma of encouraging reflective practice while struggling with the issues of institutional recognition. It was important to me to assure that institutional support was meaningful and based on our data. I did not want our involvement with action research to be perceived as yet another short lived, mandated fad. To further our understanding of the recognition of ongoing professional learning we will draw on continued input from the field and the research of practitioners like Delong and Wideman, (1998). They suggest that criteria such as the following might guide the development of professional standards in action research:

Teachers will be able to:

- *assess the effectiveness of their own practices in promoting student learning*
- *identify questions about their practice to guide inquiry into improving their own teaching, learning assessment and/or evaluation*
- *select, adapt, and develop strategies to improve practice (p.107)*

Going on to include ethical considerations, data gathering strategies, recording and sharing results, Delong and Wideman provide a useful framework for teachers to assume responsibility and accountability within their practice through action research. These kinds of field-based findings will guide our ongoing inquiry into professional learning, standards of practice and the everyday contexts of teachers' work in schools and institutions.

In this paper I have described the collaborative process of creating standards of practice for the teaching profession in Ontario. I have established connections among the standards of practice, ongoing professional learning and action research, highlighting some of the questions raised by institutionalizing action research. Answering these questions will constitute much of our continuing work in professional learning over the next year Teachers who engage in action researchers,

act as role models of lifelong learning for their peers and their students, contribute to teacher generated educational research, reflect on their practice and learn from experience. They understand the importance of personal and collaborative teacher learning. We heard their stories of experience and included their words in the draft standards. We will listen to their words again as they give feedback on our first efforts.

(For a complete version of the ***Standards of Practice for the Teaching Profession*** , please contact Fran at fsquire @oct.on.ca)

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